

Southeastern Conference Football Media Days

Thursday July 18, 2019

Gus Malzahn

Auburn Tigers

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: Gus Malzahn will be entering his seventh season this fall as the head football coach of Auburn University. He's led the Tigers to six consecutive bowl appearances, one SEC championship, two appearances in the SEC championship, and a game in the national championship game appearance, and finished last year with a resounding victory in Music City Bowl. Most significantly, he became a grandfather this March to Anderson James Peek and will become a grandfather to another baby, baby boy in does.

He's a connoisseur of Mexican food, loves to play golf, and is a fan and part of the Auburn family having seen him in Kansas City at the men's basketball Elite Eight, Minneapolis at the Final Four, and on tv when he was at Omaha cheering on the Tigers given their postseason success in men's basketball and baseball, and he holds the conference record for having been asked more questions by Bob Holt than any other coach in SEC history. Auburn University head football coach, Gus Malzahn.

GUS MALZAHN: Thank you, Commissioner. I think that last statement probably is accurate with Bob. Appreciate your leadership and all you do for our league. I'm honored to be back at SEC Media Days again. Really excited about our team again this year.

We have a lot of experience coming back. We had eight of our juniors that seriously considered leaving early to NFL that chose to come back. I really think that's where the core heartbeat of our team is, with those guys. They are very hungry. I feel like they've got something to prove, and we have very good leadership.

I brought three of our leaders with us today I'm real proud. Derrick Brown, our defensive tackle -- some project him as a first round pick -- chose to come back. When he chose to come back, it really started the rest of them to do the same.

Very well-rounded young man. Jason Witten Man of the Year finalist last year. Wuerffel Trophy nominee. SEC Student-Athlete Leadership Council, member of the SEC Community Service Team, and president of SAAC. Derrick is projected or will graduate in



December, and I think that had a lot to do with him coming back.

Marlon Davidson on the defensive end of ours, a very versatile player. He's capable of playing inside, too. And I believe Marlon is one of the best overall football players that we've had come through Auburn in my time there. He'll be a four-year starter, which is very, very up front at Auburn. He's a vocal leader, not just defense, offense, but really one of our team leaders, and he'll graduate in December also.

Our offensive tackle Prince Tega Wanogho, very athletic young man. He came as a defensive end. We switched him to tackle about three and a half years ago, and he started for the last two and a half years and plays that left tackle position. He's projected as a high draft pick himself. He graduated this past December, and he's working on his master's.

Those three guys I'm very proud of. They are fine young men, they are Auburn men, and I think you guys will really enjoy getting to know those guys better.

Talking about this season offensively, our big question is is our quarterback situation. Joey Gatewood and Bo Nix, two freshmen fighting for the position. Both of them are very athletic. They can create things when things break down. They have big-time arms. Both of them are really hungry for the job. We'll figure out in fall camp. We'll name a starter and figure which of those two guys gives us the best change of winning.

Our running backs are all back. In our league, you can't have enough running back depth. Kam Martin and Boobie Whitlow are really the veteran guys of that group. Offensive line, all five starters are back. They are five seniors. They went through some growing pains last year. They got beat up. They kind of got an edge about them. They went through spring against our defensive line and really held their own. They got something to prove, and I feel really good about that group.

Our wide receivers, we lost two of our top guys. Will Hastings and Eli Stove are two veteran guys that two years ago were some of the best play makers we had. They both were injured last year. We get them back. We had some outstanding freshman receivers that had

big-time years that got experience. We're really feeling good with the overall depth of wide receivers with the play makers that we have.

Defensively, I believe we have a chance to be the best defense that we have at least in the ten years I've been at Auburn. That is a really good feeling. It really starts with our defensive line, and the three guys that chose to come back, you know, with Derrick, Marlon, and the addition of Nick Coe. With the other guys they have, we really feel like we have a chance to be dominant on the defensive line.

Our linebackers, we did lose four seniors that were outstanding players. We feel like we're really in really good shape with the leadership of K.J. Britt and Chandler Wooten. We really don't think we'll miss a beat at the linebacker position. In the secondary, we have them all back but one and really the three seniors that are leading the way is Daniel Thomas, Javaris Davis and Jeremiah Dinson. They have some big game experience and very confident group, had an outstanding spring.

Special teams wise, we really improved last year. I think we were second overall in special teams. We got most of our guys back. We have our kicker back in Anders Carlson. He was a true freshman last year. I thought he had a solid year. We really think he is set up to take that next step.

Our punter, Arryn Siposs, came from Australia. He played Australian football. He didn't know the rules until about half way through the year. I really think he's got a chance to improve on that. And of course our kick returner, Noah Igbinoghene, a dynamic kick returner the last two years. We feel like he's going to be a really good weapon.

Our schedule once again is one of the toughest in college football. It's not a shock to our system. I really believe we're used to it. We're really looking at it as a great opportunity for us. Really that's our approach. You know, we kick off against the Oregon Ducks and the Advocare Classic at Arlington Stadium. I just found out earlier this week that College Game Day will be there for that game. That will make it even that much more special.

And you're looking at Oregon team, one much the best teams in all college football. A lot of people are picking them to win their conference. Some are picking them to be in the Final Four. Their quarterback is one of the best quarterbacks in all of college football. It will be a great test for us. We're really looking forward to see how we match up with them. Of course, you get in SEC West play, which I believe the SEC West is the toughest league in the country, and it's a grind.

And then we have a crossover opponent. We go to Florida. We haven't been to Florida in a long time and noticed that we're their homecoming opponent. We have not been too many people's homecoming opponents in the past. And then we end it with Georgia and Alabama, both at home, and of course two years ago that worked out pretty good.

You know, this will be my tenth year at Auburn. During that time, we played for two national championships. We won one. We played for three SEC championships. We won two. And when I look at the team that we have this year, there's some of the same characteristics that those championship teams had, and that's what's exciting for me. Now you got to win close games. You got to make plays when the games are on. You got to stay healthy, but I can tell you today the, exciting thing for me, I tell my team, we got a chance. Not every team in the league can say that. Really exciting times as far as that goes and looking forward to coaching this team this year.

And lastly, we lost a very important member of Auburn family two months ago, Rod Bramblett, whose wife Paula was in a tragic car wreck, voice of Auburn Tigers for over 20 years. He's a guy you don't replace. He was a blessing for me and our staff and I know all of the other coaches at Auburn to work with. He's going to be very well missed. A tough guy to replace. I just ask everybody keeps his family in their thoughts and prayers, not just now, but really this whole year. So, questions?

Q. Hey, Gus, how you doing?

GUS MALZAHN: Hey, Bob. Great.

Q. Got to do it because K.T. says it. You're the only coach left in the league that's beaten Nick Saban. You just rattled off all of the championships you've been a part of. You guys have a lot of success at Auburn. Yet it seems every other year, if you guys slipped to eight wins or whatever, there's talk about your job being in jeopardy. It's make or break, do or die, whatever cliché. How do you deal with that? How do you manage that personally with your family, with your team, with recruiting?

GUS MALZAHN: I got a job that expects to win championships, and I expect to win championships. I knew that when I signed up for that. In the years that we win championships, it's good. The years we don't, it's hot seat this, hot seat that. And I think out of the six years, four had been this same rodeo. And it's just part of the job description.

And we expect to win championships. I'm very excited about this year. And you ask how you deal with it,

that's just part of being at a place that expect to win championships. Some places eight wins, they celebrate. That's just not part of Auburn. We expecting to win championships and we've done that. And we're going to have more championships in the future here, too.

Q. Coach Malzahn, with the home of Madison Academy Football, could you update us on Austin Troxell's injury recovery? I know he's had a lot of bad luck. We're all praying for him. And Malik Miller, what role do you foresee for him this season?

GUS MALZAHN: I'll start with Malik. Malik is a veteran guy. Had a touchdown in the Iron Bowl. He gives us a lot of security, two-minute situations in all that. He's done a solid job for us. Austin Troxell, that was a big blow for us. He was our sixth offensive lineman.

He was really like a starter. He had an ACL in the spring game, very unfortunate, what was a non-contact injury. And he has had a lot of adversity, but Austin's a guy that he's been through that before. He's got a lot of support around him. He will be back. Austin Troxell helped us win a lot of games. But that was a big blow for us.

Q. Coach, do you believe the offensive line will be a strength for you this season, and how did Jack Driscoll make the transition to the SEC, and what do you envision for his future?

GUS MALZAHN: First of all, Jack Driscoll is an outstanding young man. He is a big-time college football flavor. I've got a lot of respect for him. He wasn't healthy most of the year. He had a little knee and he kept fighting through. He's a tough guy, smart guy.

To answer your question about the offensive line, yes, I do feel like our offensive line will be a strength. This time last year I think we had 16 starts between the whole group.

So you go through growing pains, and you do that in this league. And that group got beat up and a lot of blame and all this. And when you go through adversity as a group, you either fold your tent or you roll your sleeves up. That's what that group did. They started playing good football probably the last quarter of the season last year. Played very good in the bowl game. And in the spring they held their own against our defensive line. They are a confident group. We can make adjustments. Real pleased going into the season with that offensive line.

Q. Last year, on offense, you guys converted about 36 percent on third down. How important is it to

improve on that number this season, and do you think having a guy that's more of a runner at quarterback will help that?

GUS MALZAHN: Third down, especially in our league, is vital to keep drives alive. So the years we've won championships, I think we've been in the 40s. That's definitely a goal of ours. You asked about the quarterbacks. I will tell you this about our quarterbacks. Our quarterbacks will be a run threat. And when you have a run threat at quarterback, it really does change things from a defensive standpoint. And from a play caller standpoint, it gives you a lot more flexibility, too.

Q. Coach, can you discuss Joey Gatewood? What are some of the things where you've seen him develop, and what are some of the things that you still need to see him work on?

GUS MALZAHN: Yeah. Joey, this spring, he really took the next step. Now, he broke his thumb early in the season last year, so he kind of was not in the mix. We played him a little bit in the bowl game. But you really saw a difference, a different person step up in the spring. And of course we went live one day with our quarterbacks, and that really helped a lot of things from an evaluation standpoint.

But Joey's a big guy. He's a big guy. He can run. He's got a big arm. And I think he gives you a lot of versatility as a play caller.

Q. Being that you've got two new quarterbacks battling and you haven't decided which one yet, how much more emphasis will there be put on the defense with Derrick Brown and some of the experienced guys you have coming back?

GUS MALZAHN: Yeah. That's a good question. I think you look around college football the last few years, and there's been some very successful freshman quarterbacks. And if you really look, their team has been really good around them.

So really that is one of our challenges and one of our goals, is not just defensively but offensively at every position we need to be really good around whoever's going to be our starting quarterback. And that will help them grow and learn and get experience. And, you know, the thing about us with our schedule, the first part of our schedule is a man schedule, so we need to go up in a hurry.

Q. Gus, the team's motto this year has been "Ride for the brand." I was just curious, who came up with that and what does that mean to you and your team this season?

GUS MALZAHN: Yeah, "Ride for the brand" I think was a combination of a lot of things. Some of our coaches,

some of our coaches that played at Auburn understand Auburn, understand what we need to do, and some of our leaders, and really it's just put Auburn first.

We're in a day and time that is real selfish, and we're just trying to get back to Auburn. We play for the guy beside us. So just putting Auburn first, whether it's a coach, whether it's a player, everything. I think there's great power in that. And we got a lot of tradition. We got a lot of great players. And this whole offseason has been really, you know, dictated with that. And we've had all kinds of speakers, former players, we've had our former players on our staff that coach, that won championships, getting in front of our, you know, team. And really just to go back to our core values, work, hard work, things like that with our creed. And it's been really special.

Q. Coach, could you talk about Seth Williams and his progression that he's made, and do you see him being a go-to receiver this year?

GUS MALZAHN: Seth Williams is one much those freshman I was telling you about that he got thrown into action because we had some injuries and he's had great experience. He's a guy you can put out there and you can throw it up and they can have two or three on them, he has a chance to come down with it.

Seth's just really working a lot with the little things, understanding leverage and understanding blocking without the ball, playing without the ball. And he's worked really hard on that. I've seen improvement in the spring. We're going to be asking a lot more of him this year than we did last year. I really feel like he wants to be good. And I will tell you this: He's coachable.

Q. Coach, you obviously brought three huge leaders for your team here today. Who are some other key leaders on the team that you look to to help bring up the younger guys?

GUS MALZAHN: You know, I think it really starts with those eight guys that were juniors that chose to come back. I mean, I really think that's the core leadership. Seniors, I believe we got 23 seniors, too, that our guys can look to.

But, you know, it's really something special when you got that many guys that have a chance to go to the next level and they choose to come back. And, you know, there's a lot of different reasons why they come back.

But that kind of goes back to why I say this team is not only hungry, but they've got a chip on their shoulder and they feel like they have something to prove. And the years that we've had leadership like that, it's

worked out pretty good.

Q. Gus, I got a ten-part question for you now -- I'm just kidding, I'm just kidding. I have a two-partner. Will Hastings, how's his health? What are you looking for out of him? I know you and Chad Morris are friends. Chad obviously had a rough first year. How much do you guys talk? What advice maybe have you offered him? How do you expect Chad to maybe bounce back this season?

GUS MALZAHN: Chad Morris is one of the best football coaches that I know at any level. The thing about Chad, he's took over similar situations, SMU, and you just got to be patient. But, yeah, he's a friend of mine. We do talk often. And he's the type of guy that you want to root for.

He's a good guy. He does it the right way. So, real excited for him. He'll get that thing going in a short period of time.

Will Hastings from Pulaski Academy in Little Rock, an Arkansas guy, came as a walk-on. I recruited him as a walk-on kicker. He was kind of one of those trick onside guys, put him in there against LSU one time, and he kicked it out of bounds. Did it one more time against Mississippi State, didn't work. I fired him, all right, and then we had some depth issues in the spring at wide receiver. We put him in there, and it took about a week to figure out he's pretty good. Now he's ended up being one of our best players. I think he'll have a chance to play in the NFL.

Will, last year, not having him, it really hurt us. Will can get open versus anybody covering him in a man-to-man situation. He looks like he's about 13 years old, too. If you ever see him, you wouldn't think he's an SEC player.

Q. You mentioned staff changes on the offensive side in the offseason. You're calling plays again right now. So talk us through what was your thought process to make you decide to change that, and what are the roles for Kenny Dillingham and Kodi Burns now on the new staff?

GUS MALZAHN: When I decided to go back and call plays, that's really who I am. I'm an offensive guy. That's what got me where I'm at. Through the years, you get advice and all of that. And of course I made a mistake. When Chip left, which Chip is an outstanding football coach, and he is going to do great at Troy. When he left, just the reality is what now. Just decided to getting back to being me and call plays. It's been a very refreshing thing. I know the bowl game we played really well, but when I'm back in the swing of things, the day-in-and-day-out coaching on the field, what happens is the whole team takes on my personality. It

just feels natural. I wasn't really good at standing back and watching you.

And when I decided to do that, I felt like I needed to hire somebody that was good at coaching quarterbacks, that understands a little bit of our system that was okay with me calling plays. And of course Mike Norvell, the head coach of Memphis, is my former GA. He's outstanding. He's also one of the smartest coaches I know. He learned under him, Kenny did. So it was a natural fit. And right off the bat, even in the bowl game, Kenny Dillingham was upstairs and just helping me through everything. It was really natural. I felt really good about that. And you asked me about Kodi Burns. Kodi Burns has been with me a long time. These two guys right there I lean on a lot. They are both very young, energetic, smart guys and understand how we think. And of course, the addition of Cadillac Williams, too, very excited that we have Cadillac Williams back at Auburn coaching our running backs, a wonderful human being. He's as good as it gets, and Wesley McGriff came back on the defensive side of the football. We had him three years ago. He goes to be a coordinator at another school, and we got him back. I'm really proud of our staff.

Q. Coach, I know you talked a lot about the difference between the offense you may have run last year and then you taking over play calling duties again this year. I heard you talk a lot about pounding the ball, really placed an emphasis on the run game, draw safety in, vertical over the top play action, how important is the intermediate pass game in the offense that you plan to run this year?

GUS MALZAHN: It really a lot of times depends how defenses are playing. In this league, if you're going to win a championship, you have to be able to run the football effectively, and you have to get where they're rolling an extra safety down, and then you got one-on-ones on the outside.

Our philosophy is run the football and throw it deep. And whatever the defense gives us, that's what we should be able to do. That's really the corps and playing fast. We're getting back to really playing fast. You look back, I guess 2009, my first year at Auburn, we were playing fast. I don't know. I think we were one of the few, if the only team, playing fast. Other teams were griping and all this. And now everybody is playing fast. Even the ones that had health issues and all that, they're all playing fast.

Now it's not the same advantage it once was. You got to stay on that cutting edge, and you got to evolve and everything that goes with that.

Q. Hey, Gus, you mentioned Kodi Burns. He's from

Fort Smith. You probably know that. What kind of coach is he? How is he -- what's the best thing? What's he bring to your staff?

GUS MALZAHN: Kodi Burns is a guy I got a chance to watch grow up. I'm from Fort Smith, too, like you know. I got a chance to watch him grow up. Matter of fact, I was coaching at Springdale High School, and he was the quarterback at one of our rivals at Northside High School. I recruited him when I was at Arkansas. Then I got here to be the coordinator at Auburn. He was one of our players. He was a big part of our national championship team in 2010. He caught the first touchdown in that game. He was a GA for me. He knows how we operate. He's a bright, young man with a bright future. He'll be a head coach at this level. Kodi's got everything it takes to be a big-time coach.

Q. Gus, you talked about the assets of Gatewood. What about Bo Nix? What are the things you like about him?

GUS MALZAHN: Bo was a guy we recruited for a long time, like Joey. We knew a lot about him. Bo is a great competitor. A true freshman coming in. I mean, from day one when he stepped on campus, he had the mindset that he was going to be the starting quarterback, and I think that's rare.

Him and Joey both have done a good job trying to win over their teammates, understanding that's a big factor. But Bo's a lot better athlete, I think, than most people give credit, and I said he's got a chance to really be special, as does Joey Gatewood.

Q. Coach, a lot of talk this week about the transfer portal and how it's affecting recruitment and just general team management. How do you feel about the transfer portal, how it's going, and how it's affected Auburn?

GUS MALZAHN: The transfer portal, I think everybody's got an opinion, but I think the bottom is I think it's probably here to stay.

The biggest challenge I think from a coach's standpoint is roster management. And I really believe the teams that can manage the roster the best, it will be an advantage. That's a big challenge. And any time the first year you learn, and I think probably every head coach in the country learned.

I think moving forward you're going have to know about the heartbeat of your team. You're going to have to be able to predict certain players may lead, may not. And then I think there's something, too, about relationships, just having those real good relationships, those honest relationships with your players, their parents, and everything that goes with it. And I think the teams that can do that the best, I think they'll have an advantage.

Q. Following up on the freshman quarterback battle there, how do you -- in the era of where more players have options, and it's played out at other schools, how do you foster a competition like that and have that in your program? Also, does that -- knowing that players have other options, how do you kind of prepare, you know, a stable of quarterbacks in that way?

GUS MALZAHN: Yeah. I think it was kind of what I was just kind of answering, that just being honest, but for us right now, we've got two freshmen that are competing for the job. We have Cord Sandberg as our number three quarterback that we really feel good about him once he gets back in the swing of football. He played professional baseball for five years.

It's just something, like I said, you've got to develop great relationships with your players. You got to be honest with them. And I think you got to develop great relationships with their parents, too.

I think we're in really good shape and really good hands with our quarterbacks and don't expect any to be leaving.

Q. Coach, I wanted to ask you about your two receivers Anthony Schwartz and Sal Cannella. What do you expect from them this season?

GUS MALZAHN: Sal Cannella is a guy that made a big-time catch in the first game last year against Washington. You know, he's very versatile. He knows every position in our offense and our receiving group. And I really think Sal's in a good position to take that next step.

Anthony Schwartz, I've coached some really fast guys before, but he may be at the top of that list. There's a lot of guys that are track guys that have trouble keeping their speed once they put on pads. He's got real speed. And really what stood out to me is he's a football player. He does the dirty work and he blocks.

You know, you got to understand, he didn't even go through the summer last year. He showed up in August because he was traveling the world with track. And for him to have the year he had was really unbelievable. And I think he's going to be a huge weapon for us this year. When you got a guy that has real speed like that, that changes the dynamics of defenses and everything that goes with that.

THE MODERATOR: All right, Coach, thank you for your time this morning.

GUS MALZAHN: Thank you, all.